

A Deep and Dirty Truth

by Ted Harrison

Ecclesiastes reminds us that a humble awareness that we are dust enables us to engage deeply with life and with creation.

INTRODUCTION

The following Bible study brings Ecclesiastes—an often-misunderstood book of wisdom from the Old Testament—into conversation with literature from throughout the ages. It is suitable for individual study or for groups. Feel free to adapt it to your group, context, and time constraints.

Shakespeare's Hamlet skewers King Claudius with these words: "A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that has fed of that worm." The king interjects, "What dost thou mean by this?" Hamlet responds: "Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar."

Let's rephrase things delicately: Hamlet is reminding Claudius that he is ultimately (ahem) "manure." The Book of Ecclesiastes says it this way: "all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" (3:20).

In the Book of Genesis, the first person is called *adam* because he is made of dirt (Hebrew *adamah*). The same wordplay is retained in the English language between the words *human* and *humus*. Those words share their root with "humility," and it's a sensible humility that both Shakespeare and Ecclesiastes are trying to teach us.

Ecclesiastes advocates for joy and compassion in a life that is marked by its shortness and mysteriousness, a life that is often difficult and unfair.

OPENING

Share the following prayer.

God of mystery and creativity,
May we step back
from human arrogance.

May we respond
to the world's suffering
with discernment and humility,
knowing ourselves as brief creations
of earth and breath. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Ecclesiastes 3:9–22, the reading for this study, follows the famous words paraphrased in a song made popular by The Byrds, *Turn! Turn! Turn!* You may choose to sing or review that song before the reading. This study gives particular attention to the last five verses (18–22).

STARTER QUESTIONS

- Does Ecclesiastes' insistence that "all are dust" resonate with your experience of Ash Wednesday liturgies or funeral committals?
- The Book of Ecclesiastes uses the Hebrew word *hebel* some 40 times! Although that word has sometimes been translated as "vanity" or "meaningless," Latin American theologian Elsa Tamez suggests that it should be translated with the Spanish word *mierda* (which we might politely translate as "manure"). Does this change your understanding of the book or its message?
- Does the image of dirt change for you when you hear that a typical square foot of topsoil often contains many hundreds of living creatures, including mites, grubs, springtails, millipedes, beetles, bacteria, fungi, protozoa, seeds, grasses, and algae?
- In the fourth century, Saint Augustine referred to our human bodies as "the earth we carry." How has our perspective changed since then?

GETTING OUR HANDS DIRTY

"[A]ll have the same breath.... all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Ecclesiastes 3:19–20). These phrases suggest a healthy sense of our shared earthiness with the rest of creation. In fact, the Hebrew language has no word at all for non-human nature as a separate reality. Ecclesiastes echoes the biblical creation story, in which disobedient humanity is made of dust, and returns thereto (see Genesis 3:19). Like Elsa Tamez translating "vanity" as *mierda*, the biblical "dust" is also often translated as "ashes," "earth," and even "rubbish."

On a sunny afternoon as you sit and read in your home, you may notice many floating dust particles, their slow dance captured in a sunbeam. The dust in the air and under your bed is composed primarily of two things: loose fabric from clothing and furnishings, and you—your lost hair and constantly shedding skin. Every experience of household dust can remind you that so much of you is already dust, already joined to the cycles and seasons of creation.

Remember the Christmastime merriment of Scrooge's nephew, Fred, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*? Fred defends his revelry to Scrooge with these words:

"Uncle!... I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time...as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave..."

- Can a realization of our earthiness achieve a Scroogian transformation in you?
- Can our reality as “fellow-passengers to the grave” in some way be regarded as good news?

MORE CONVERSATION STARTERS

- In a July 2007 *Rolling Stone* article, Al Gore says that the environmental movement has a very deep spiritual component, adding that the American civil rights movement gained momentum when it was lifted out of the political framework and put in a spiritual framework. Is it important that we see our place in the environment through a spiritual framework? Conversely, are we importing a think-green ethic that is alien to our religious tradition?
- There is an old saying about religious folks who are so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good. Are there forces that have disconnected us from our natural earthy awareness?
- Environmental advocate Thomas Berry speaks of a mysterious purposefulness to the universe, an emerging complexity that intrigues and humbles us. Ecclesiastes suggests that human life is a brief conglomeration of earth and breath, and that being aware of this helps us be glad. Does a sense of life’s fragility and shortness increase the degree to which we cherish life?
- “Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil and a chasing after wind” (Ecclesiastes 4:6). Does an awareness of our own

earthiness produce a more realistic and modest lifestyle?

CLOSING

Sing or read *More Voices* #174, “Soil of God, You and I” or *Voices United* #105, “Dust and Ashes Touch Our Face.”

Closing Prayer

Creator God, you who weaves earth with breath,
Forging an intimacy between creation and all its inhabitants,
May we learn from that relationship, and live in wisdom, justice, and humility. Amen.

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